

God Is Closer Than You Think: In Times of Crisis

Psalm 23

Introduction:

1. We are all familiar with the crises of life.
2. How do you define “crisis”?
 - a. Differs with age. (baby—broken toy; teenager—break-up; young adult—broken marriage; middle age—broken dreams; senior adult—broken health)
 - b. Becomes more practical and existential with age
3. How do you handle crisis? (denial, explosion, implosion, faith)
4. We’re on familiar ground with Psalm 23—memorized it.
 - a. Too familiar—how do we hear it now?
 - b. The familiar often carries a lot of baggage
 - c. Known as the “funeral” Psalm—a lot of spiritual, emotional and personal attachments to Psalm 23.
 - d. It is precisely because Psalm 23 transcends time, space, and place that it is such a powerful text.
5. Although this psalm is appropriate for funeral and memorial occasions, it speaks of how God shepherds us our “whole life long.”
 - a. Psalm 23 is more about God-centered living than it is about death.
 - b. It’s appropriate on warm, sunny, May Sunday mornings.
 - c. Even when there’s no funeral to attend.
 - d. On the mountaintops as well as the dark valleys

“The Lord is my shepherd”

1. Shepherd imagery is prominent in OT for God’s care over his people.
2. Uncle Zollie Coffey (Uncle Zeke)—shepherd in North Dakota
3. What does the shepherd do? (cares, comforts, guides, protects, leads, heals, corrects)
4. If the Lord is your shepherd, what else do you need?

“I shall not want”

1. Are you sure about that? Wanting is what we do.
2. Living out of a fundamental attitude of trust is counter-intuitive and countercultural.
3. What is it we all want?—MORE! I shall want. I shall always want. The advertisers and the malls beckon me to want the newest, shiniest, latest, coolest, hippest, biggest thing. I am instructed from childhood to want—and not merely to want, but to have.
4. Comparing us to sheep is not a compliment—sheep are not brilliant—without a shepherd they will nibble themselves lost.

5. What if we began to live with the assurance that God has already supplied all our needs? What really matters that I do not have? What, at the hour of death, would I dare not lack? The answer is not iPhones, vacation houses, and more toys. Jesus spoke with the rich young ruler who claimed to be good and had lots of stuff. What did Jesus say? “One thing you still lack.”
6. We don’t lack lots of things: we lack just one. The one thing we lack is intimacy with God. The one and only thing that can cause us to say “I shall not want” or I “lack no good thing” is God. Nothing else. Just the Lord who is a good shepherd to his sheep.
7. God is our satisfaction. God is good enough. Or, to be truer, God exceeds whatever we think we might desire.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures.”—rest and refreshment

“He leads me beside still waters.”—provision—life-giving

“He restores my soul.”

1. Do you ever need those times of refreshing from the Lord? We all do.
2. God will give them to us. “I shall not want.”

“He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.”—God will not lead us down a path that will bring him dishonor.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”

1. Now we come to the “dark valley.” Why is it we connect with this verse? Have you been through a dark valley? Are you in the middle of one right now? Do you see one looming on the horizon, just around the next bend?
2. The Bible is very honest about dark valleys.
 - a. We’d like to skip over them, wouldn’t we?
 - b. Dark valleys are a part of what it means to be human.
 - c. Dark valleys are unavoidable.
 - d. Dark valleys are unpredictable.
 - e. Dark valleys are impartial.
3. What is God’s word to us when we find ourselves in the “valley of the shadow of death?”
 - a. “You are with me” is the center of the psalm—26 words before and after.
 - b. Do you think that God is trying to tell us that this is the whole point of the psalm?
 - c. The God of green pastures, the God of still waters, the God of restored souls, is also the God of the dark valley. “I am with you. You shall lack nothing.”

4. WHAT IS THE VALLEY YOU'RE GOING THROUGH TODAY?

- a. Depression? Illness? A strained relationship? Facing your own mortality? Doubt?
 - b. God does not leave you to walk through your dark valley alone—he is there beside you every step of the way.
5. God is with us. We are not alone down here. Isn't that the whole essence of the gospel? Jesus was called "Emmanuel"—God with us. John Wesley's dying words were, "the best of all, God is with us." God doesn't shelter us from trouble. God doesn't magically manipulate everything to suit us. But the glorious "with" is unassailable, unchangeable, the only fact that matters.
6. Did you notice the subtle shift in verse 4? The psalmist shifts from 3rd person to 2nd person. Instead of talking about God, he begins to talk to God; instead of God in the head, God is a friend in the heart. A conversation happens, a relationship grows. This is faith, the only true comfort. If we genuinely and in the marrow of our being believe that God is with us, then the only logical consequence would be, "I shall not want."
7. The rod and staff are symbols of God's protection and guidance.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

1. God invites us to his banquet—he is the host—he welcomes us.
2. As long as we're in the Lord's presence, we are under the Lord's protection.
3. What enemies threaten you today? God's presence banishes them. Even the enemy of death no longer has dominion. Whether in life or in death, our goal is to be in the presence of God. ("To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.")

"You anoint my head with oil."

1. Hospitality—welcoming
2. Consecration—anointing of kings and priests—setting apart
3. Medicine, balm, soothing ointment.
 - a. As host, God sees to it that we lack nothing that we need—we are made presentable to both the host and the guests at the banquet.
 - b. Sheep tend to wander off and become injured as they get caught in briars and brambles.
 - c. As shepherd, God brings the sheep back into the fold and tends to their wounds.
4. How has life wounded you? "Thou anointest my head with oil."

"My cup overflows"—abundance—more than enough

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

1. The Hebrew word for “follow is actually the word “pursue.”—Suddenly goodness and mercy are not like two little puppies following close behind, tails wagging. Now goodness and mercy are the hounds of heaven pursuing lost souls and lost congregations.
2. What if we as individuals or as a congregation do not see obvious signs of goodness and mercy close on our heels?
3. This psalm is not about the obvious. It sings a daring song of hope: “Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me...and, finally, catch me.”

What about you and me? Where does this psalm fit into our lives in the here and now?

1. I may be uncertain about what is going on in my life, but the Lord is my shepherd.
2. I may be struggling to make ends meet, but I will not lack.
3. I might have trouble sleeping because of everything going on, but God causes me to lie down in good pastures.
4. Storms and floods and hurricanes and tornadoes may bring damage to life and limb, but God will lead me to still waters.
5. I might be beaten down and hurt right now, but my very being will be restored.
6. I may be walking through a valley that seems to have no end, but God is with me and my fears are cast upon him.
7. I may have wandered off the right path and been torn up by the brambles and briars of life, but God will bring me back to the fold and apply his healing oil of grace to my life.

The psalmist recognizes and invites us to recognize as well, that our immediate circumstances are not the end of the story. No matter what is going on, there is more to this life than the now. It is a reminder that it is ultimately God who provides, nourishes and comforts us in our times of trouble, and that this provision goes beyond just the immediate and pursues us “all the days of our lives” and invites us to also dwell in the house of the Lord for the length of days.